

HISTORY REQUIRES THIS GENERATION TO LEAD

AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN TUROK

Michael Nassen Smith, IFAA's new deputy director, spoke with ANC veteran and New Agenda editor Ben Turok about the echoes of South African struggle history in today's student movements.

Michael Nassen Smith: What did you make of the student protests that emerged in 2015? It seemed to take everyone by surprise.

Ben Turok: It certainly took me by surprise. What happened is really quite substantial in terms of social unrest and it is extraordinary that everybody says there was no organisation, no real coherent strategy. There was a great deal of "spontaneous combustion" and yet it won major victories. We have always argued that struggle requires organisation, requires policy, requires leadership, requires consistency. Students seem to have done without that until now.

And you know it throws me back to the days of Che Guevara and his proposition of the "detonator theory". To some extent, we also used this in South Africa. The formation of MK [uMkhonto weSizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC)] was meant as a detonator: you make people feel that there is new power, new strength, and you are able to create

an atmosphere for change. I must say that I have always been very sceptical of it – but I think maybe I was wrong, because this detonator seems to have sparked something.

MNS: What do you make of the students' demands?

BT: There are two separate points: fees and curriculum. It is clear that a large number of students come from very poor backgrounds and can't afford a university education. If a first-year law student at UCT has to pay R100 000, where is a domestic worker going to get that, ever! And yet that student wants to do law and he or she is very clever. So I certainly support the idea that a student who has the capability should be able to go to UCT for free. But I think there can be no argument that the children of millionaires shouldn't pay. We don't need universal free education. Things are getting mixed up. We want free education for those who can't afford it. That is social justice.

About decolonisation, I have for a long time been saying that our universities need to be decolonised because they have remained traditional and modelled on an alien Oxbridge style. For example, I know somebody who holds an MPhil in economics who tried to register at the University of Pretoria for a PhD. The department said to this person, "You don't have statistics, so you can't register." Now, economics is not statistics. Why



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do you have to do stats? The reason is that they want to be in line with Oxbridge. The universities in Western countries now teach a certain kind of macroeconomics and South African universities are following the style. Why? We are in South Africa, in Africa, why don't we pioneer our own style? In every economics department in an African university – and I have lectured at many – you can talk about development economics, Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, dependency theory, political economy. The students are familiar with it. Not here, not in South Africa.

Economics is just an example. We certainly need to become African, absolutely. But this has not been on the agenda. Until now.

MNS: The students have embraced new heroes and a new ideology. What are

your thoughts on the re-emergence of Africanism and identity politics in student circles?

BT: Let me start with a bit of history. In the 1940s, members of the ANC Youth League began to talk about African nationalism in an exclusionary way. It is important to make the distinction between Africanism and exclusionism. I recall at that time there was a group who were anti-white, anti-communist, and who operated within a branch of the ANC Youth League in Orlando, Soweto.

MNS: [Nelson] Mandela and [OR] Tambo were included in this?

BT: No, no. This was a small group of Africanist youth leaders. It was the foundation of the PAC [Pan-Africanist Congress]. Robert Sobukwe gradually assumed the unofficial leadership of the Orlando Africanists and so of the PAC. Obviously, the ANC at the time had a very different policy. The ANC was moving towards a multiracial outlook, which then became consolidated in the Congress of the People and the very successful campaign that launched the Freedom Charter.

The ANC was the huge mass movement that galvanised the Defiance Campaign, which led to the Treason Trial in 1956. The extraordinary thing about the Treason Trial is that there were 156 accused and we were all members of different organisations, from the Indian Congress, the Coloured Congress, the ANC and the Trade Union Congress. Although the prisons were racially segregated, we were all in court together. It was this that cemented the Congress Movement politically. The Congress Movement became a reality in the Treason Trial as a non-racial movement. Of course, the Africanists did not like that, nor did the white Liberal Party, which was also anti-communist. They didn't like it



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because we consolidated, we became a family.

We had great reservations about Africanism. The Freedom Charter's first clause says "South Africa belongs to all who live in it" and, frankly, the ANC leadership had made a calculation that the minorities in South Africa were so large that there was no way that you could ignore them. Furthermore, the minorities were very powerful in the economy and social fabric and it was totally unrealistic to think that Africanist exclusionism was going to succeed. Our feeling was that this exclusionism was a distraction, because there we were, attempting to build a national movement involving all the people. Don't forget the Indian Congress at the time was a very powerful organisation, with its history of Gandhi and passive resistance and so on. They were very strong and the Indian working class in Natal was very militant. The coloured workers in Cape Town were very militant. And there was the trade union movement, which was multiracial. Of course there were problems with white unions and



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coloured unions and African unions but, as a body, the South African Congress of Trade Unions was a multiracial organisation.

MNS: Where was the Communist Party in all of this?

BT: Well, eventually the Communist Party made its position clear. The origins of the Communist Party were in the white working class. It was not an accident that Bill Andrews, a white British worker, was chairman of the Communist Party for quite a few years. It took a long time for the Communist Party – which had a strong contingent of white leftists, many from Eastern Europe, people like Ray Alexander and so on – to accept that the liberation movement led by the ANC was a legitimate course. It took a long time. Don't forget that many thought that the ANC was a bourgeois movement led by the middle class. There were communists who thought that the ANC was a liberal organisation, petty bourgeois – and there was an element of truth in that. There was another group, led by Yusuf Dadoo, who said no, communists must identify with the ANC. Moses Kotane certainly supported this view. So there were different schools within the Communist Party. In about 1958 or '59, the Communist Party had a conference which made a final resolution.

On the question of race, whites were very well ensconced in the Communist Party from the beginning and there was no way that they would leave. That created a very fertile ground for non-racialism and, indeed, in the Communist Party there was a very strong sense of comradeship across race. We did not have race barriers in the Communist Party. It was unheard of.

MNS: What was your personal experience with these debates and the politics between the ANC's multiracialism and the Africanists? ➤

BT: My active period in South Africa was the late '50s, when I had a senior position in the movement, when I worked with Walter Sisulu, Yusuf Dadoo, Moses Kotane, Michael Harmel. But then I went to jail in 1962, so I was a bit out of touch with certain developments. And then I went into exile. So many things happened when I was in exile and I can't speak with authority, but what I can say is that the ANC and the Congress Alliance, which was still separated into racial categories, was solidly behind the idea of the Freedom Charter that South Africa belongs to all who live in it.

In exile, while I was teaching on the continent, there was a PAC group that went to lobby [Tanzanian President] Nyerere, they lobbied [Ghanaian President Kwame] Nkrumah, they lobbied to the effect that the ANC was selling out because the ANC was led by whites and communists. When I was in Dar es Salaam, on the OAU Liberation Committee, people like Nyerere seemed to favour the PAC because it was Africanist. The ANC battled with this idea of Africanism in exile. Nkrumah was different because he had a Marxist orientation, but many other leaders in Africa thought that the PAC was the real thing and the ANC was the sell-out.

MNS: What explains the success of the Congress Tradition then?

BT: Because it was right. This brings us to the present day. The makeup of South African society means that racial exclusionism won't work. We also can't just talk about "black empowerment", "black advantage", and so on. You see this in the business world with the focus on ownership and management positions. We need deep structural changes. The ANC realised –and you can see this in the Morogoro Document of 1969 – that



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you can't change society by political manoeuvring. You have to change the structure of the political economy. In the trade union and working class movement, they don't play around with identity discussions.

I want to make this clear: African leaders of the ANC were very, very proud of their identity as Africans –Moses Kotane used to say sometimes that he was an African first and a communist second –but there was a commitment to unity and shared struggle. Look at Mandela. He was very much an African. But ANC leaders were not satisfied with identity politics as a liberating force. They reckoned that they had to go much deeper into society, into the political economy. Strategically, it was important to go to the masses and build peoples' power among all groups in the country. A focus on identity alone is a shallow focus; it does not deal with the socio-economic structure of society. We in the Congress movement always understood that if you don't deal with the socio-economic foundations, you are hanging in the air.

Identity politics involves short sharp protest actions that are symbolic, as opposed to a working-class or mass struggle. This involves organising the workers, having a trade union, having paid-up membership, having meetings, having a policy, having vision, having

strategy and tactics. This is struggle. It takes a longer-term view because it has a more fundamental view of how you change society. One might succeed in the short term on the basis of identity, and the students have achieved significant gains and must be applauded. Yet what is needed is a student body that is going to be effective and long-lasting. One with policies directed towards building a new university and a new society. Maybe I am polarising it a little too much, but that is my view.

MNS: What do you see as solutions?

BT: Students must build power around their demands. Is the student movement developing a theory? A revolutionary theory or a protest theory? Is there a document that you can turn to and say that this is the platform around which the future will be built? I am sure work is being done but this needs to be taken seriously. Ad hoc protests are not enough. Maybe the worst thing is that struggle based on identity politics can disintegrate quite quickly.

Leadership is required. People follow leaders and people join movements where there are leaders they respect. This is common cause. The student movement needs a respected leadership which is conscious of history, which understands the place of students in the total society, which is able to generate demands that are reasonable and sensible, and which can get the support of the public.

If the students want to sustain victories they have to retain public sympathy because the public is going to pay. They need to build a wide base of support. History is requiring this generation to lead. That is what South Africa is waiting for. **NA**